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T O K E N

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AFFECTION AND RESPECT,

TO THE PARISHIONERS OF

ST. MARY WOOLNOTH,

A N D

ST. MARY WOOLCHURCH, LONDON,

FROM THEIR

M I N I S T E R.

ACTS xxvi. 3.

BESEECH THEE TO HEAR ME PATIENTLY.

L O N D O N :

PRINTED IN THE YEAR 1781.



A

T O K E N, &c.

MY RESPECTED FRIENDS,

IT being impracticable to *write* separately and distinctly to every person in the parishes with which I am connected as a Minister; I cannot offer you this testimony of my sincere regard for your welfare, without availing myself of the conveniency of the press. But you may be assured, that this Address, though it waits upon you in print, will not be published or sold. It is designed, not for the public, but for you. And I wish, while I express myself with freedom, to observe the same respect and tenderness, as if I had an opportunity of conversing personally and severally with each of you.

My income from the parishes is legally settled, and regularly and readily paid. I am well satisfied with it; and have only to wish on this head, that the people of my charge may be benefited by the Ministry which they jointly contribute to support. I acknowledge likewise with thankfulness to God and

to you, that in the occasional intercourse I have had amongst you, I have never received the least personal incivility or unkindness from any one. Though I cannot but know and lament, that the subject matter of my preaching is to many of you not pleasing; and though several steps I have thought it my duty to take, must appear, to some of you, unnecessary and troublesome innovations, I have met with no direct and studied marks of opposition or ill-will. Your conduct has in this respect, been worthy of the politeness and humanity which distinguish you on other occasions.

The only cause of complaint, or rather of grief, which you have given me is, that so many of those, to whom I earnestly desire to be useful, refuse me the pleasure of seeing them at Church on the Lord's-Day. My concern does not arise from the want of hearers. If either a numerous auditory, or the respectable characters of many of the individuals who compose it, could satisfy me, I might be satisfied. But I must grieve, while I see so few of my own parishioners among them. Let me intreat your favourable attention, while I respectfully and affectionately expostulate on this head.

The general design of my Ministry in this city, might, and I trust would have been answered, if it had pleased God to place me in some other parish. But He saw fit to fix
me

me amongst you. This appointment, as it ought to give you a preference in my regard, and to make me studiously solicitous to promote your advantage; so likewise it gives you a more immediate and particular interest than others, in the event of my services. However little worthy of your notice in any other view, if I am a servant of God, a Minister of the Lord Jesus Christ, if I speak the truth in love, how can I but be pained at the thought, that many to whom the word of salvation is sent *, refuse to hear it, and reject the counsel of God against themselves † !

I am unwilling to suppose, and yet, when I consider the progress of infidelity in the present day, I cannot but fear, that there may be some amongst you who absent themselves from the Church, not so much from a dislike of what may be called my scheme, or my sentiments, as from a disregard to religion in general, at least to the Christian religion. I know how to pity persons of this unhappy turn, for it was too long my own. It is not only a hazardous, but an uncomfortable state; for notwithstanding their utmost address and endeavours, they cannot wholly avoid painful apprehensions, lest the Bible which they wish to be false, should prove to be the truth. It was thus with me, and it must in the nature of things be thus

* Acts xiii. 26. † Luke vii. 30.

with every Infidel. To doubt or deny the truth of Christianity is too common, but to demonstrate that it is false, is an utter impossibility. I laboured long in the attempt, but when I least expected it, I met with evidence that overpowered my resistance; and the Bible which I had despised, removed my scepticism. He against whom I had hardened myself, was pleased to spare me; and I now live to * tell you, that there is forgiveness with him.

But the greater part of you, I am persuaded, will agree with me thus far at least, that the Scripture is a Divine Revelation. But do not some of you act inconsistently with your acknowledged principles? Can you reconcile your conduct to the precepts of God, or to the character of those who fear and love him, as described either in the Old, or New Testament? If *you* have servants and dependants, you expect to be obeyed; and do you profess yourselves the servants of God, and yet allow yourselves in the breach of his known commandments? The habits of business or amusement in which you live, not only engross your time and thoughts during the rest of the week, but indispose you for the due observation of the day which he has enjoined you to keep holy. You have engagements of another

* Psal. cxxx. 4.

kind,

kind, which will not admit of your stated regular attendance on the public worship of God; and if you constrain yourself to be present occasionally, the light which a faithful preacher forces upon your conscience offends you, and makes you willing to catch at every pretence which may furnish you with the shadow of an excuse for not hearing him again.

But this is not the character of all who have withdrawn themselves. Some of you have not forsaken the public worship; you attend at other churches, and are ready to complain that you have been driven from your own. If you have candor to allow that possibly I mean well, yet the manner of my preaching is so different from what you were formerly accustomed to, and from what you approve, that after having heard me, and perhaps more than once, you have been constrained to seek new places, and to resign your seats in your parish church to strangers. If I venture to plead with you upon this ground, it is not without being aware of the delicacy of the subject. It will seem like pleading my own cause. But I am conscious, that I would not trouble you with a single line in the way of self-justification, if it were not for your sakes, and with a desire of obviating such misapprehensions, as I verily believe you cannot retain without disadvantage to yourselves.

As a Protestant Minister, and preaching to Protestant hearers, I not only take my text from the Scriptures, but likewise draw from thence the proofs and illustrations of what I advance in my sermons. I frequently, constantly, appeal to the Bible, the acknowledged standard and touchstone of religious sentiments. As a Minister of the Church of England, when speaking to the professed members of that Church, I might likewise appeal to the current doctrine expressed in our Liturgy and articles; but I seldom do it, because having, as I conceive, the highest authority, the holy Scripture, on my side, I need no other. If you could be certain, that with respect to the points wherein we differ, the Scriptures are for you and against me, your refusal to hear me would be justifiable. But otherwise it behoves you to be cautious, least while you think you only reject what appears to you novel or impertinent, your contempt should unhappily fall upon the doctrine of the Prophets and Apostles, and of Christ himself. I must magnify my* office. On other occasions, I wish to demean myself as the least of all, and the servant of all; but when I stand in the pulpit, I speak in the name and under the authority of him, whom we believe will shortly come to be our judge, and who has said, He that despiseth † you, despiseth me.

* Rom. xi. 13.

† Luke x. 16.

I mean not to take up your time at present, with a detail or a discussion of sentiments. I offered a brief outline of my thoughts and aims, in the first sermon I preached among you, and which was printed solely with the design of presenting it to you; though by a mistake that gave me pain at the time, it became more public than I intended. To the profession I then made, I have, by the goodness of God, been enabled invariably to conform. I doubt not but I have spoken the truth*; I have endeavoured to speak it in love. It is true, I have not dared to disguise or palliate my principles. I account it a great mercy to me, that I have not been influenced by the fear or the favour of men. But my conscience bears me witness, that so far as truth and duty would admit, I have studied to avoid whatever might give you offence or pain. When I came to St. Mary Woolnoth, not being altogether a stranger to what is called the world, and to the maxims prevalent in genteel life, I could not promise myself very general acceptance as a preacher. I knew that if I would be faithful to my conscience, some of my hearers must be displeased; but though I was constrained to risk your displeasure, I have been solicitous not to provoke it, or to lay any unnecessary difficulties either in your way, or in my own.

* Eph. iv. 15.

Many persons whose good sense and liberal education, exempt, or free them from prejudices of other kinds, are frequently almost as much under the power of *religious* prejudices as the vulgar. We lament this more than we wonder at it. The reason is obvious. In temporal concerns they examine and judge for themselves. But in religious matters, they are content to let others judge for them, and (if I may so speak) to swim with the stream of a prevailing opinion. To this cause I must ascribe some of the exceptions that are taken to my ministry.

In almost every age and country where Christianity has been professed, some hard name or term of reproach has been imposed upon those who ventured to maintain a more evangelical strain of doctrine, or a stricter course of conduct, than was agreeable to the spirit of the times in which they lived. Even the *Christian* name, honourable as we may now think it, was used by the Heathens, when it first obtained, as a stigma, a term of the utmost contempt and hatred; and Christians were, by common consent, reputed the off-scouring*, and filth of all things. In a like reproachful sense the names of Lollards and Gospellers were applied by the Papists, to those whom God honoured as his instruments in freeing our fore-fathers from

* 1 Cor. iv. 13.

the shackles of Popery, by introducing that light of truth which issued in the Reformation. Men of the same spirit were afterwards branded in *Protestant* nations with the terms Pietist and Puritan. Of late years the name of *Methodist* has been imposed as a mark and vehicle of reproach. I have not hitherto met with a person who could give me a definition or precise idea of what is generally intended by this formidable word, by those who use it to express their disapprobation. Till I do, I am at a loss whether to confess or deny that I am (what some account me) a Methodist. If it be supposed to include any thing, whether in principle or conduct, unsuitable to the character of a regular Minister of the Church of England, I may, and I do disown it. And yet it is probable, that some of my parishioners hearing, and easily taking it for granted, that I am a Methodist, think it a sufficient proof that it cannot be worth their while to hear me.

That I may not disgust and weary my hearers by the length of my sermons, I carefully endeavour not to exceed three quarters of an hour, at those seasons when I have most reason to hope for the presence of my parishioners. At other times I allow myself a longer term, but even this I understand is thought too long. If I considered my preaching only as a customary appendage, without which I could not, with a good grace, collect

lect my dues, we should not long differ upon this point. So far as brevity would be pleasing, it would cost me little trouble to please. But if the proper ends of preaching are to instruct, to admonish, to exhort, and to persuade; if the great truths of Scripture are to be explained, illustrated, and applied; if the various known or probable states and cases of the several persons who compose our auditories are to be attended to; in a word, if, as a preacher, I am conscientiously to endeavour to save myself and them * that hear me; then I confess I know not how to answer these ends, were I to limit myself to a much shorter space than I do. And sometimes when my heart has been deeply impressed with a sense of the worth of souls, the brevity and uncertainty of life, and the solemnity of that hour when both preachers and hearers must give an account of themselves to God, I have, perhaps, in defiance of my previous determination, been constrained to exceed it a few minutes, though but seldom. I am persuaded you are mistaken, when you think the length of my discourses is the cause of your dissatisfaction. It is not so much the length, as the subject matter that wearies you. It is possible I could, if I durst, preach a sermon, which, though it exceeded three quarters of an

hour,

* 1 Tim. iv. 16.

hour, you would not think too long. Many persons can afford their attention for several hours to pleaders at the bar, or to speakers in parliament, without weariness, whose patience is quickly exhausted under a sermon, where the principles of Scripture are plainly enforced, and a faithful application of them is addressed to the conscience. I mean not to vie with the public speakers you admire. I lay no claim to the honour of an orator, nor do I expect or even wish to engage your attention by the elegance and modulation of my periods. If I possessed abilities of this kind, I must decline the use of them. I must speak to the unlearned as well as to the wise, and therefore my principal aim is to be understood. Yet I would hope I am not justly chargeable with speaking nonsense, or expressing myself with a levity or carelessness unsuitable to the pulpit, or disrespectful to the auditory. But alas! there are too many hearers, who seem more desirous of entertainment, than of real benefit from a sermon! They do not act thus in the affairs of common life. Were they to consult a physician or a lawyer, they would not be content with having their opinion upon a point of law; or a case in medicine in which they themselves had no personal concern. It is their *own* case they expect should be considered. But when they come to church, if the discourse be ingenious, and the elocution of the preacher

preacher agreeable, it suffices; and the less the subject comes home to their personal concernment, the more (in general) they are pleased with it. That is, they are disposed to be pleased with the preacher, if he says nothing to make them displeased with themselves.

Another objection which I must likewise treat as a prejudice is, that I am an extempore preacher. The practice of reading sermons to a public assembly, has been hitherto peculiar to the English nation. Bishop Burnet observes, that it took its rise soon after the dawn of the Reformation amongst us. Latimer and other great men, whose names, now they are dead, are mentioned with some respect, were, when living, treated by many as if they had been Methodists. They were contemptuously stiled Gospellers, and preaching in unquiet times, when there were insurrections in different parts of the kingdom, they were traduced as our Saviour and his apostles had been before them, and charged with having a design to foment sedition by their sermons. This was done with a view of awakening the suspicion and distrust of Henry VIII. against them, who was a prince sufficiently jealous of his authority. The preachers not only disavowed the charge, but were led to write their discourses, that they might, if necessary, confute their slanderers, by producing what they had actually delivered.

delivered. The like accusations, and the like suspicions, in some succeeding reigns, rendered the same precaution expedient. At length the custom became general and established. In most, if not in all other parts of Christendom, a man who should attempt to read his sermon from the pulpit, would find but few hearers: he would be judged disqualified for the office of a preacher by his own confession. Insomuch that they who after having previously considered their subject, are not able to speak upon it with some degree of readiness, are obliged not only to write their sermons, but to submit to the burdensome task of committing them to memory; for reading them would not be endured. With us, on the contrary, the prejudice in favour of reading is so strong, that many people can form no expectation of sense, argument, or coherence from a man who preaches without a book. They will require little more proof of his being unworthy of their notice, than to be told, he is an extempore speaker. Here again, in the concerns of common life, they judge and act otherwise. There is little doubt but the theatres would soon be much less frequented, if the performers were to appear with books in their hands, and each one to read his respective part. And perhaps the theatre is the only place where a public speaker would be much admired, if it were known that he spoke

spoke neither more nor less than he had previously determined to say. In parliamentary debates, and in pleadings in our courts of justice, the occurrence of unexpected replies and objections, and other new circumstances, renders it necessary that a man should be so far master of his subject and his thoughts, as to be able to accommodate himself to those sudden turns, which often lead him into a train of discussions and arguments, which could not be premeditated, because the occasions could not be foreseen. If this habit and facility of speaking off-hand, and applying principles of general knowledge to particular subjects and incidents as they offer, be allowed, approved, and even required in other public speakers, why should it be supposed that the *Preacher* is the only person who cannot, or must not, express his thoughts, but in that order, and in those words, in which he has previously written them? Is not Divinity a subject sufficiently copious? Are not the topics which the Scriptures afford, well suited by their importance, certainty, and authority, to awaken the strongest emotions, and to draw forth the highest exertions of which the human mind is capable? Shall the management of the contested claim of a house or a field, or the interests of contending political parties, be deemed of such consequence as to engage the attention and admiration of hearers?

And

And shall a Minister of the Gospel, when called by his office to unfold the wonders of Redemption, or to enlarge on the solemn themes of Judgment, Heaven, and Hell, be thought the only man who has chosen a subject incapable of justifying his earnestness, or of furnishing him with such thoughts and expressions upon the spot, as the most judicious part of his auditory need not disdain to hear? Certainly, if the Bible be true, a Minister must have the advantage of all other persons who speak in a public character! His subject is more weighty, and of infinitely more concern to his hearers. He speaks in the name of God, and has an express promise of the assistance of his Holy Spirit, if not to supersede his faculties, yet to influence, animate, and guide them, to bring things seasonably to his remembrance, and to apply them to the heart with a divine energy. We know that it is so in fact; and though we are slighted, and perhaps despised, by many, there are others who receive our testimony with joy, and will acknowledge, that what the world esteems the * foolishness of preaching, has, by the blessing of God, made them wise unto salvation †.

I earnestly intreat you, my beloved friends, seriously to consider these things. In the midst of the various sentiments and opinions

* 1 Cor. i. 21. † 2 Tim. iii. 15.

which prevail, it is at least certain that we are all mortal, and that life is not only short, but highly precarious. If you believe the Scriptures, you acknowledge, that after death there is an appointed judgment, and an unchangeable, everlasting state. If so, should you not carefully examine the ground of your hope, and fear even the possibility of a mistake, which, if not rectified before death, will then be fatal and without remedy? If you would not sign a lease or a contract without examining it for yourselves, why will you venture your eternal concerns implicitly upon the prevailing opinions of those around you? Especially, when our Lord himself has told us, that whoever may be right, the *Many* are undoubtedly wrong. For * “ wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and *Many* there be that go in thereat; because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, that leadeth unto life, and *Few* there be that find it.” If for the present you seem confirmed in your manner of thinking and living, by the numbers, names, and examples of those with whom you agree; yet consider, you must soon be separated from them all. Not one of them will be able to comfort you in a dying hour, or to answer for you to God. You may live in a throng, but you must die alone. Religious subjects are seldom the

* Matt. vii. 13.

chosen topics of conversation, in what is usually called good company; if occasionally introduced, how superficially are they treated, yet how peremptorily are they decided upon, and then how readily dismissed! But sooner or later their importance will be known. The Scripture is the rule by which we must all be judged at last; it is therefore our wisdom to judge ourselves by it now. Would you be persuaded to do this, praying to God for that assistance which you need to direct your enquiries, and which he has promised he will afford to them that ask him, it would have a happy effect upon your principles and your peace. Search and read for yourselves, if the Scripture does not speak to all * mankind as in a state of condemnation; if it affords us any hope of deliverance but for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ †; if it intimates any method of being saved through him, but by a faith ‡ wrought by the operation of God, and evidenced by a temper of love, and a habit of chearful obedience to his precepts §: if these points, which comprize the general scope of my preaching, are contained and taught in the Bible, they ought not to be spoken against.

I can have no interest to forward by this address, except that interest which I feel in your welfare. I have no favor to solicit from

* Rom. iii. 19. † Acts iv. 12. ‡ Mark xvi. 16.
§ Col. ii. 12. Gal. v. 6. 1 Pet. i. 2.

you, but that you would attend to the things which pertain to your eternal happiness. I can truly say, I seek not your's, but you *. Though I am not indifferent to your good opinion, so far as respects my integrity and moral character, yet it is a small thing with me to be judged of man's judgment ; nor would your united approbation content me, except I could hope it was founded in your cordial acceptance of the Gospel which I preach. I have taken this method, as it seemed the only one in my power of acquainting some of you with my sentiments, which yet it highly concerns you to know ; not because they are mine, but (I speak it with confidence) because they are true, and of the utmost consequence. However amiable and benevolent in your private characters, except you are born again, † born from above, delivered from the love and spirit of the ‡ world, and made partakers of the love and spirit of the § Lord Jesus, you cannot be accepted of him in the great approaching day of his appearance. My heart longs for your salvation ; but whether you will hear, or whether you will forbear, I must take your consciences to witness, that I have been faithful to you. If after this (which may God forbid) any should perish, I am clear of || their blood. Permit me to make one

* 2 Cor. xii. 14.

† John iii. 3.

‡ Gal. i. 4.

§ Rom. viii. 9.

|| Acts xx. 26.

request.

request. It is not likely that I shall ever trouble you in this way again, and therefore I would intreat you to preserve this paper. If it makes no impression on you at present, a more favorable season may come. If you pay but little attention to it in your prosperity, a time of affliction may invite you to peruse it again. If you regard it not while I am living, you may, should you survive me, read it more carefully after my decease. It is however probable, that some of you will not survive me. Death may be even at your door. If the thought of such a visitant be unwelcome to you, it is owing to a secret consciousness that you are not prepared for it, and therefore you seek refuge from the painful apprehension, in a round of business or pleasure; perhaps for the present with too much success. Yet sooner or later, the hour you dread must come. "It is appointed for all men once to die, and after death the judgment." There we shall all meet. May the Lord God so influence your minds now, that our meeting then may be comfortable and happy.

Thus far I have written chiefly to those who absent themselves from the Church. But I thank God I am not wholly deserted by my parishioners. With regard to those who have patience and candor to hear me, I have a hope that what may now seem harsh and difficult in my sermons, may hereafter
approve

approve itself to their judgment. No person in the congregation can be more averse from the doctrines which I now preach than I myself once was. This gives me encouragement for others, especially when they are willing to attend on the means which God has promised to bless. For faith * cometh by hearing. If I have at any time, contrary to my intention, uttered a single sentence in my own spirit, or that might give them *just* cause of offence, I should be glad, if I knew it, to ask their pardon.

Some of you there are (may God increase the number) who not only hear, but approve, because they have an experience in their own hearts that I speak the truth. They have felt the evil of sin, and the necessity of a Saviour. They have received the record God has given of his Son, and place their whole dependance upon him, as their wisdom, † righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. To these I can address myself with more freedom. You know the difficulties of my situation, and will assist me with your prayers. I trust likewise you will assist me by your conduct, and that your lives and conversations will contribute to stop the mouths of gainsayers, and constrain them to acknowledge, that the doctrines of grace, which I preach, when rightly under-

* Rom. x. 17.

† 1 Cor. i. 30.

stood and cordially embraced, are productive of peace, contentment, integrity, benevolence, and humility. Many eyes are upon you, watching for your halting, and seeking occasion by your miscarriages, if they can observe any, to speak evil of the * way of truth. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ enable you to disappoint them, and make them ashamed! We must expect some opposition, many temptations and trials; but we are engaged in a good cause, and we have a mighty Saviour, a compassionate friend, a prevailing advocate. He knows your path; He sees your conflicts. And He has engaged to support, to guide, and to guard you, and at length to make you † more than conquerors, and to bestow upon you a ‡ crown of everlasting life.

I am,

Your affectionate servant,

HOXTON,
Nov. 1, 1781.

JOHN NEWTON.

* 2 Pet. ii. 2. † Rom. viii. 37. ‡ Rev. ii. 10.

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